

U.S. Stake in Gorbachev Survival Rises; Baltic Situation Causes Most Concern

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As ethnic strife and secessionist pressures buffet the Soviet Union, U.S. officials have been forced to acknowledge that the United States has a stake in President Mikhail Gorbachev's survival that now outweighs the old Cold War hope that the U.S.S.R. might fragment or fall apart.

U.S. officials express concern about the bloody internecine warfare between Moslem Azerbaijanis and Christian Armenians in the southern Caucasus but say they are more worried by the snowballing drive for independence in Lithuania and the other Baltic states that were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union at the outset of World War II.

U.S. policy for 50 years has regarded the Baltic states as "captive nations" not legitimately subject to Soviet rule. If Gorbachev uses force to prevent a breakaway by Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia, the United States almost certainly would have to choose between its old "captive nations" policy and its desire to see Gorbachev climb out from under the many burdens weighing on him.

Although they are unwilling to talk publicly, a number of senior U.S. officials reveal in interviews a collective view inside the administration about Gorbachev's problems that differs little from the assessment offered by George F. Kennan, the 85-year-old dean of U.S. Soviet experts. Testifying before a Senate panel last week, he said:

"The extensive failure, to date, of *perestroika* [Gorbachev's drive to restructure the Soviet system] to meet even the normal demands of consumers in large cities; the disorders in the Transcaucasus and in Moldavia, and the demands of peoples and communist parties in the Baltic countries for virtual secession... have created a situation of great difficulty and danger for Gorbachev, who is viewed as personally responsible for all these crises and difficulties."

"So great are the political burdens he has now come to bear that it is doubtful he could have remained in office as long as he has were it not for his international prestige, which constitutes an important asset for the Soviet state, and for the fact that none of his senior colleagues has any program to offer as an alternative. . . ."

"To a great extent, Gorbachev has been the victim of his own success in opening up the Soviet system politically," said one senior U.S. official. "Now that people have greater freedom to complain, they are increasingly bold in making clear that they haven't seen any improvements in their everyday lives as the result of *perestroika* and they're getting tired of waiting."

"Gorbachev has been going on the theory that the cure for the failures of the communist system was to make it work effectively to meet people's expectations," the official added. "Many of us always have worried that there might be a built-in fallacy to this idea—that the system is incapable of working efficiently and that Gorbachev, therefore, is bound to fail."

Another official noted the events in Eastern Europe since the summer have pointed up a new concern: "It may be that the Russians, like the people in the former East European satellites, don't want communism even in a new and improved form. Ever since Gorbachev made clear he wouldn't use Soviet tanks to keep the countries of Eastern Europe in Moscow's orbit, they've been running away from communism toward free-market economies as fast as they can. Some of the same impulse clearly is present in the secessionist attitudes now surfacing in some of the Soviet republics."

But, U.S. officials agree, except for some marginal help such as easing restrictions on trade with the Soviets, the United States has nothing to offer Gorbachev economically except its best wishes and hopes that, in time, *perestroika* will start working well enough to take the edge off the impatience of Soviet consumers.

In fact, many of the officials agree that the internal Soviet discontent probably has given Gorbachev a breathing space because it has made his rivals think twice about applying for his job. As Kennan told the Senate, "It is questionable whether there is any among

his potential rivals who would like, at the present time, to assume this burden in his place."

Of more immediate concern to U.S. officials are the ethnic rivalries and stirrings of independence threatening the breakup of the vast collection of Soviet republics stretching from the original base of European Russia across Asia to the Pacific.

In the view of U.S. officials, the violence in Azerbaijan does not pose a long-range threat to Gorbachev because it is rooted more in ethnic animosities than in a desire for independence from Moscow. Some analysts have expressed concern about Moslem fundamentalists wanting a union of Azerbaijan with neighboring Iran, but U.S. officials contend that the idea of what one called "a lot of little Khomeinis springing up in Central Asia" is greatly exaggerated.

"If there is an impulse toward closer ties with a Moslem country [in Soviet Central Asia], it is toward Turkey. And the Turks certainly do not have the political will or the economic resources to take away part of the Soviet Union," the official said. "Azerbaijan is essentially a problem of preventing anarchy, and we believe that it will subside once Moscow figures out the necessary amount of force that it must apply to restore law and order."

By contrast, the officials said, Lithuania's threatened secession represents a serious, short-term threat that could give possible rivals an opening to charge that Gorbachev's policies are leading to the dissolution of the country.

"If Lithuania goes, the whole existence of the Soviet Union will be at stake," one senior official warned. "It almost certainly would be followed by the other Baltic states, and beyond that, it's 50-50 whether the precedent would be confined to the Baltics or spread to Georgia, to Moldavia and to the Ukraine."

At this point, the officials contend, the question of what the United States would do in the event of a Baltic secession is too hypothetical to answer. But some acknowledge that the United States could wind up in the awkward position of finding that the "captive nations" policy, long regarded as a Cold War anachronism kept on the back burner as a cheap way of appealing to U.S. voters with roots in these countries, is coming to fruition at a time when it could undercut Gorbachev.

However, other officials argue that the United States cannot desert its principles in the name of expediency. "If we were out front supporting independence for Poland and Czechoslovakia and the other satellites, we can't justify turning our back on Lithuania because the Soviets say it's part of the U.S.S.R.," one said.

If Lithuania persists in moving toward secession, some U.S. officials think that a face-saving way out for everyone concerned could be found in the example of another Baltic nation—the "Finlandization" policy followed by Helsinki after its 1940 war against its bigger Soviet neighbor.

Essentially, that enables Finland to follow Western political and cultural models. But it maintains a neutralist foreign policy designed to avoid giving Moscow any cause for alarm, and it reserves a large and lucrative share of its trade and investment for the Soviets.

"The Soviets have gotten far more out of that relationship than they ever would have if Finland had become a part of the Soviet Union," one official said. "Since the Baltic states already are tied closely to Moscow economically, it should be possible for Gorbachev to work out similar, mutually agreeable arrangements as the price for letting them go."

Whether that can be done in a way that allows Gorbachev to preserve his position and get on with his pursuit of reform is still far from clear. But, as U.S. officials admit, it is likely to have considerable bearing on the administration's hopes that Gorbachev can continue playing the role described by Kennan in his Senate testimony.

"Gorbachev has made an outstanding contribution to the overcoming of the Cold War and to the laying of the foundations for a more stable and peaceful Europe," Kennan said. "It remains in our interests and in those of world stability that he should carry on with his ideas and initiatives so long as his energies and the patience of his colleagues permit."